

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Fraught and Unpredictable: An Overview of the American Elections

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

The coming US elections on November 5, particularly the presidential one, are the most fraught in American history. The presidential contest is also attended by unusual uncertainties concerning the roles of personalities, institutional dysfunctions, and media influence in a perturbed cultural context. No one can confidently predict the outcome.

COMMENTARY

The onrushing US presidential election on November 5 – just 84 days from now – has developed into the most fraught and unpredictable in US history. It is fraught because the very nature of the American government is at stake in the outcome. It is unpredictable mainly owing to intersecting concentric circles concerning the vicissitudes of key personalities, the function of several core American political institutions, and media influence in circumstances of acute cultural perturbation.

Why Fraught?

Former President Donald Trump's disregard for the US Constitution and the rule of law is manifest. After losing the November 2020 election, he sought to thwart the peaceful transfer of power for the first time in US history by inventing a "Big Lie" conspiracy theory about that election, conspiring to present lists of fake electors to the Electoral College, and summoning a mob to violently prevent the ratification of Electoral College results. In short, he attempted a coup.

Despite all this, his party did not repudiate him, enabling Trump to later suggest suspending the Constitution so he could reassume power, claim total immunity from all wrongdoing as President, and most recently, on July 27, tell a Christian summit,

“Four more years, you know what? It’ll be fixed, it’ll be fine. You won’t have to vote anymore, my beautiful Christians”.

The unmistakable pattern here cannot be explained or wished away. The fact that Trump is also a twice-impeached convicted felon and has been indicted for several other felonies testifies to his purely instrumental attitude toward the rule of law. His announced plans to neuter the professional civil service and create a party-state of his own supporters, and his often-manifest fondness for foreign dictators further belie his authoritarian cast of mind. Yet no senior Republican dares criticise him; the entire party as it now exists is suborned to Trump’s purely transactionalist agenda.

If Trump wins back the Presidency, the United States may soon cease to be a viable democratic constitutional republic. If he loses and predictably claims “deep-state” fraud, the odds of major socio-political violence breaking out – over what looks to be a fundamental, non-transient political divide within the American body politic – are high. Either way, American political culture could become significantly, perhaps permanently, degraded.

Personalities

Donald Trump has proven a shrewd manipulator of the media. His behaviour during an August 1 interview at a National Association of Black Journalists event was widely described as a meltdown, but Trump’s demeanour was probably deliberate. Making outrageous claims in front of a naturally sceptical audience helped him wrest back news cycle control from Kamala Harris and shift the tenor of his exchanges with her to the highly emotional, arational levels he sees as his arena of advantage.

Creating and harvesting outrage has long been Trump’s signature political technique, but its continued viability is doubtful. Wild statements do get attention, but mocking Harris on the grounds of inauthentic ethnicity will hurt him with African-American and Hispanic constituencies and those registered as independents. And those habituated to the dopamine flows that entertainment elicits sooner than later, get bored with the same old tricks.

Kamala Harris’ elevation, meanwhile, has flipped the “old man” baggage: she does not carry the load Joe Biden did; now Trump does, and his doddering, unhinged speech grows more obvious by the day. However, Harris lacks Biden’s senior status and name recognition, and she is subject to being tarred by Republican propagandists with unpopular administration policies in which she had no decisional role – particularly immigration and southern border security policies and inflation.

How, and how successfully, will Harris parry these misrepresentations? She must campaign energetically but, as a black female in a culture still ambivalent about race and gender in politics, also carefully. As a former elected Attorney General of a major US state and an experienced prosecutor, she is well positioned to campaign to the centre on immigration, exaggerated perceptions of rising crime, and other hinge issues.

But Harris needs to skilfully raise her image by presenting herself as part of a team that includes both older and younger straight “white” folks if she is to win not just the

Presidency, but to pull the Senate and House of Representatives with her. Can she successfully do this? Minnesota Governor Tim Walz as a running-mate works well and is a hopeful sign; beyond that one-off, however, no one knows.

Institutional Dysfunctionality

During the three weeks after Joe Biden's disastrous June 27 "debate" performance in Atlanta, the Democratic Party looked confused and leaderless, revealing its thin bench of nationally recognised leaders. On the other hand, the GOP had become a cult of personality, an institutional dictatorship in effect, with Trump ousting or isolating nearly all Republican "normies". This is not the way major American political parties are supposed to be, and act.

The Democrats recovered fast: Biden stepped aside, and Harris became the acclaimed nominee even before the Democratic National Convention. Harris also raised vast amounts of money quickly and her popularity surge has been dramatic. In late June, Trump led Biden by six points in national polls; by 5 August, polls showed Harris ahead of Trump 46 per cent to 43 per cent. Whether that trajectory will endure remains to be seen.

Harris will not be aided by the conservative-majority Judicial Branch's turn to a blatantly partisan and jurisprudentially unmoored manner of decision-making unprecedented in American history. The Supreme Court's July 1 decision on presidential immunity and Judge Aileen Cannon's July 15 decision throwing out of Special Prosecutor Jack Smith's case concerning Trump's illegal theft of classified documents mean that the two most politically significant indictments against the former President will not come to trial before the election.

More germane, even if Harris' polling numbers continue to thrive, a 3 per cent edge might not suffice to get her elected. With the Electoral College weighted to favour lesser-populated rural states, she may win the popular vote by a healthy margin – thanks to supermajorities in urban areas – and still lose the election. About half a dozen swing states are crucial, so winning Pennsylvania by 1,000 votes is vastly more important than winning New York, Chicago, and San Francisco combined by 1,000,000 votes.

Media Influence Amid Cultural Disruption

A stark question thus begs asking: If Trump rejects every Enlightenment principle at the base of the American liberal democratic ethos, why does he remain so popular? No depredation that has come to light – from his groping women and paying hush money to a porn actress to his fomenting a coup – seems to have moved the political needle.

Indeed, even after the shock of January 6, 2021, the Republicans won control of the House in the November 2022 midterms despite a near-total absence of contrition about what happened that day at the Capitol. Poll after poll since then indicates that voters do realise that American democracy teeters on the brink, but most care less about that than about inflation and other bread-and-butter issues. What's going on with *We the People*?

Digital disruption has deranged American culture and politics over the past dozen or so years, synthesising and magnifying long-brewing social trends that have turned American politics toward a form of surrealism. For a large percentage of the electorate, the boundary between what is real and what isn't has blurred, and the media has played an outsized role in the process.

Commercial broadcast and social media are nearly fact-free and have become increasingly biased and polarised forms of clickbait infotainment. Meanwhile, a continuing decline in deep literacy and a shift in the business models of declining print media have sharply reduced the percentage of Americans who regularly read reliable news sources.

Consequently, images have largely replaced words in political communication, such that objective information about candidates' and parties' positions, knowledge of major issues, and character assessments are neither readily accessible nor salient to most voters. Civil discourse and calm deliberation have disappeared from the American political scene. This is part of the reason Trump's incessant mendacity does not seem to affect his popularity.

Under such circumstances, American politics has become a form of "blood sport", rendering elections competitions for the votes of a mainly present-oriented and entertainment-besotted electorate. Subjective perceptions formed mainly on the basis of sophisticated political advertising spin, and fundraising success to support that spinning, wins the day nearly every time. When sobriety is outdone by whimsy, accurately predicting electoral outcomes becomes impossible in such circumstances.

Other Wildcards

If that were not enough uncertainty to think about, three fainter circles of uncertainty may also come to matter in November.

The third-party bid of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. could affect the outcome by pushing close votes in key swing states one way or another. However, no one knows which major party candidate would benefit and which would be harmed.

Foreign influence operations from Russia and other state actors will surely return, this time deploying sophisticated video deepfakes and technologically advanced internet-bot social media fakery. The combined influence of those efforts is not reliably assessable before the fact.

Finally, prospects for an "October surprise" – most likely an expansion of Middle East fighting that could pull the US into major combat operations – are high. How that would affect the elections is unknowable since its impact would depend on a set of shifting contextual factors no one can predict.

In the face of so much and so many diverse forms of uncertainty, believe not anyone who claims to know what will happen on November 5. As always, however, the whole world will be watching – and this US election will be a political spectacle like none before it.

Dr Adam Garfinkle was a former Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He was also the Founding Editor of The American Interest.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798